World War One Memorial Memo

The National Mall is home to many memorials for the significant wars of the twentieth century. But there is one war whose memorial is sorely missed: World War One, the first Great War. Compared to its importance in American history, its place in American culture is far too insignificant; with its importance and the relative lack of information known about it, it more than merits a memorial on the National Mall alongside such national icons as the Vietnam War, Korean War, and World War Two memorials. The purpose of this memorial is to honor those who fought and died for the cause and keep the impact of the war fresh in the minds of the American people. Although no living veterans of the war remain, remembering their sacrifice and dedication and the impact that the war has had on our lives remains of tantamount importance.

The visitor’s experience will begin upon walking along the paths of the gardens surrounding the memorial. These paths, like the rest on the grounds of the National Mall, do not imply a direction in which to talk, and as such the visitors are free to walk through the gardens as they please, reflecting on the peace and serenity that the sacrifices of the war have given them. At the point marked on the provided aerial map, the central garden path—10 feet in width—will begin to gradually descend, at a slope that wheelchairs will easily be able to handle. As the path descends below ground level, the path is bordered on the left and the right by two walls of brown marble, of a natural shade of brown that solemnly imposes but yet does not oppress. Etched into the walls, and of a cream color, are tens of thousands of names, organized in alphabetical order by last name, of every soldier that perished in the war and every American non-civilian that perished on “ground zero” in the war effort—the visitor will be reminded that with all wars comes sacrifices, not from just one individual nor from a mass of unidentified people, but from a giant number of individuals, even beyond enlisted soldiers and extending to those civilians who gave their lives to the war effort.

Trench warfare was one of the major new warfare developments in World War One, and the life of all soldiers on the front lines revolved around these winding ditches. As the visitor descends between the walls of brown marble, the visitor begins to feel as though he or she is entering a trench. The trench slowly winds and turns, preventing the visitor from seeing the end of the trench until the end is very nearly approached—this permits the visitor to focus on his or her immediate surroundings. At the trench’s brief lowest point, a person with above-average height will be completely under ground level—this will allow the visitor to empathize with the claustrophobia that the soldiers lived with every day, but the visitor, in case he or she may be extremely averse to such sensations, will only very briefly be “completely underground.” The trench will be surrounded on either side by short bushes, thereby removing the visitor from the outside world, allowing him or her to focus on the current experience and achieve the introspective state of mind prompted by such a memorial.

To give the visitor a concretely human representation to interact, connect, and empathize with beyond the bodiless names etched into the marble, there will be three slightly opaque glass statues interspersed throughout the first two-third of the trench, aiming or looking out through gaps in the bushes over the horizon as if keeping watch on “No Man’s Land” for any incoming enemy troops. When the visitor looks into the soldiers, he or she will see himself and will be reminded that he himself or she herself is the person for whom the soldier fought and died.

As the visitor approaches the end of the trench, a glass arch begins to rise into view, soaring over the exit from the trench. In war, the average soldier holds on to the promise of the end of the war in order to survive the emotional strain of war—as the visitor wanders through the somber trench, seeing the glass arch gives the visitor a shade of this same sensation. After the trench reaches its deepest point, it begins to incline as gradually as it had declined. The brown marble continues at the same level, slightly above ground level. When the path reaches ground level, it continues sloping upwards to a height of three feet above the ground, on top of a semi-circular platform made of light grey stone, of a material virtually identical to the material stone of which the World War Two memorial largely consists—thus, the connection between the two World Wars is made in the mind of the visitor. The platform—the shape of which can be viewed in the images provided—faces the World War Two memorial: because the aftermath of World War One led to the conditions in Germany that led to the rise of Adolph Hitler and the Nazi Party that led to World War Two, that the visitor leaves the World War One memorial and is faced directly with the World War Two memorial allows the visitor to connect with this progression of history.

The mostly-clear statues of the two soldiers on the platform, “walking” in the same direction as the visitors exiting the trench, symbolize the collaborative effort that is necessary for the soldiers to help each other into life after the war. It allows the viewers to connect with the soldiers and also to remember that after such an all-consuming event as war, life continues, and the repercussions of the war must be dealt with. But the nature of the statue—one soldier helping another—is strongly optimistic, allowing the visitor to convert the somberness, imparted onto him or her by the trench, into a desire to make a positive change in the world so that such sacrifice will not have to be necessary in the future.

In making a monument, there will inevitably be controversy. For one, the deciding whether to put the memorial directly in front of the World War Two memorial or north-east of it, as indicated in the drawings provided, will be a tough decision requiring considerable outside input. Opposition to putting it north-east of the World War Two memorial, in a less conspicuous position, might imply to some that World War One is of lesser significance than World War Two – however, this notion of World War Two being of greater importance is a popular notion, so there might not be such controversy over that location. On the other hand, putting it directly in front of the World War One memorial may meet even more criticism than the World War Two memorial did for obscuring the view across the National Mall, and it may also appear to some to overly clutter the National Mall, making it seem like “a place for war memorials.”

Also, having the memorial in the form of a trench, underground, may seem to some like the memorial intends to hide the war below-ground; this was one of the reasons for the raised stone platform at the end, giving the visitor a sense of achievement and pride in the war, for which so many sacrificed.